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“Forgive Me, Because I Could Not Find Papyrus”: The Use and Distribution of Ostraca in Late Antique Western Thebes

“Forgive me, because I could not find papyrus while I was in the countryside.” So starts O.Crum 129, a letter from an unknown sender to his holy father—an unnamed monastic elder—and another monk, Brother Zael.¹ The writer in this instance specifies why he was unable to find papyrus: he was away from town and had no access to a supply. Such an explanation is not typical and most likely reflects the particular circumstances of this writer. Normally, the phrase occurs alone, with some minor modifications, either at the beginning or the end of the letter.² Taken literally, it is suggestive of a general lack of papyrus. However, the often wanton use of papyrus in western Thebes indicates that there was no significant problem in this respect in the region.³ The statement rather reflects the greater status that papyrus held over reused potsherds and limestone flakes, and its inclusion is in turn an acknowledgement of the recipient’s status, as somebody deserving of a letter written on papyrus. Materiality was imbued with social connotations, at least ideally. However, in practical terms some materials were simply more convenient, and ostraca were perhaps the most convenient of all.⁴ Their abundance made them readily accessible for daily needs and their diverse shapes, sizes, and textures meant that writers could easily find something suitable for their purposes.

Western Thebes is one of the best areas in Egypt to study the issue of the material aspects of texts. From the very late sixth to late eighth centuries, thousands of

1 ΚΩ ΝΑΙ ΕΒΟΛ ΧΕ ΜΠΙΟΝΧΑΡΤΗΣ ΕΙΣΤΕΤΩΩΕ (O.Crum 129.1–2). The address at the end of the letter is lost, wherein the writer would have included his name; the recipient’s name may also have been included here.

2 For example, O.Crum Ad. 25 begins with the politeness marker ΔΡΙ ΠΝΑ “do the mercy” (which could be translated as “please” in English). This ostrakon is also an example in which the phrase is written at the end of a letter rather than at the beginning; see also, e. g., O.Brit.Mus.Copt. 2.31. Förster 2002, 867–868 provides references to a number of other examples, but the list is not exhaustive.

3 Profligate use of papyrus is evident in several ways: Arabic protocols were rarely cut off the beginning of rolls in order to be reused, as was the case in other areas (on the reuse of protocols, with particular focus on the monastery of Apa Apollo at Bawit, see Delattre 2007, and P.BruX.Bawit 55/37; 56/19; 57/44; 58/9; 59/17; 60/14 [in the paired numbers, the first number is the edition of the protocol, the second is that of its reuse])—the only Theban example of which I am aware is a fragment of an account, P.Mon.Epiph. 570; large empty spaces are frequently left within the document, note in particular P.KRU 19, in which there is a vacant space of approximately 30 cm between the final witness statement and the scribe’s notation; and large letters and well-spaced lines demonstrate that scribes were not trying to be economic with space.

4 On the role of ostraca in everyday writing, see Bagnall 2011, 132–135.

documents survive, written on papyrus, parchment, leather, pottery, limestone, and wood, mainly written in Coptic, with a smaller number of Greek texts.⁵ Trismegistos, the online papyrological database, lists 2,499 texts from western Thebes in this period.⁶ Of this total, 2,120 items are ostraca, that is, 84.8 percent. This statistic demonstrates that ostraca were the primary vehicle for everyday writing, and a wide range of document types are represented, including accounts, legal contracts, letters, lists, notes, oaths, and receipts. The number of ostraca can further be divided into those written on either pottery or limestone, with the former comprising 81.8 percent, equating to 69.4 percent of all Theban texts in Trismegistos. However, the designation “pottery” in itself is a broad category, containing a variety of ceramic wares, not all of which were contemporary late antique products but dated as far back as the pharaonic period.

Another advantage of focusing on western Thebes, in addition to the sheer number of texts that survive on diverse writing supports, is that the texts were written in several settlements across the area, including monastic, ecclesiastic, and secular communities. Many texts have secure provenance, often precise findspots, others can be confidently assigned to specific sites, while a number have only a general Theban attribution. The goal of this study is to combine the different information that is known for Theban ostraca—their content, material, and provenance—to assess if there are any patterns in material use across these sites and document types. Not only will this contribute to our knowledge of written culture in the Egyptian Chora before and after the Arab conquest of 641, it will help develop criteria upon which documents with insecure or unknown provenance could be assigned to one site.

1 Western Thebes in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries

The pharaonic landscape of western Thebes was reshaped in late antiquity (Fig. 1), with the mortuary temples and royal and private tombs reused as villages, churches, and monastic settlements, the latter ranging in size from single-occupation cells, to small hermitages with a handful of individuals, to sizeable communities of several dozen monks.⁷ Textual material has been found across the region and the different settlement types.

5 To date, only two Arabic texts—O.Deir el-Bahari 19 and P.Hal. Inv. DMG 3 (published in Liebrecht 2010 and re-edited in Vanthieghem 2019)—are known from the Theban area.

6 Trismegistos.org (last accessed: 2.5.2018). This figure is correct as of 2nd May 2018, using the parameters “Provenance”: Thebes west, and “Date”: between 550 and 800 CE (strict). The dates are selected using the ‘strict’ option in order to exclude material given a very broad date from the third or fourth century and later. If, in future, dates are refined for other material, the numbers used in my discussion will naturally change.

7 On Thebes in late antiquity, see especially O’Connell 2007 and 2010; Wilfong 1989 remains a useful overview; recent work in the region is presented in Choat/Cromwell 2016. A map of late antique remains is provided by Pimpaud/Lecuyot 2013, pl. XXXII.

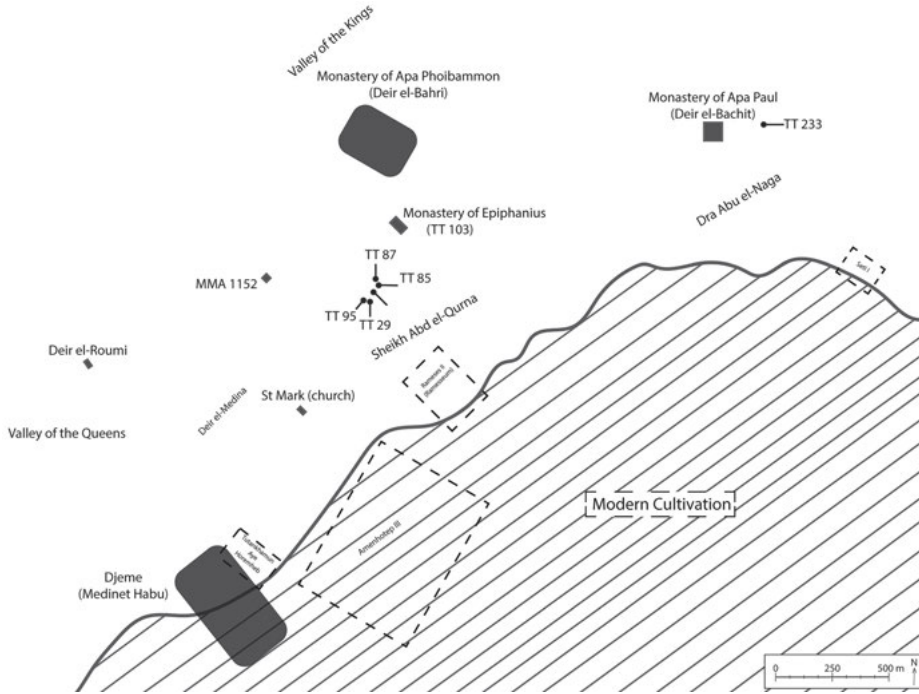


Fig. 1: Map of select monastic and secular communities in western Thebes.

In the early days of excavation, especially the nineteenth and very early twentieth centuries, ostraca were collected en masse without recording their findspot; an example is Naville’s excavation of Deir el-Bahri, where he was primarily (if not only) interested in the pharaonic remains of the mortuary temple of Hatshepsut, rather than the Coptic remains of the Monastery of Apa Phoibammon built on top of it.⁸ A large number of ostraca were purchased on the antiquity’s market and many of these at best have a general “Thebes” provenance. This is not to say that all early excavations did not record such details. Herbert Winlock worked at Theban Tomb (TT) 103—referred to in scholarship as the Monastery of Epiphanius (although never as such in the texts themselves)—between 1912 and 1914 on behalf of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. His goal was to record the location of all documents, but he reports on the difficulties

⁸ Godlewski 1986, 17 noted “Il est curieux que E. Naville ne dit rien des constructions coptes qui se trouvaient en surface de ces décombres.” However, Naville’s phrasing in his reports reveals his attitude towards the later remains on top of the temple: “The Copts made such havoc in this beautiful temple, that only the lower part of the walls of the upper platform are left, and the most delicate sculptures were used by them as raw building material” (Naville 1893–1894, 2). His report refers to the size of the rubbish mound left by the Copts and the “layer of Coptic rubbish” and one sentence suffices to describe the ostraca (p. 4: “In this we found ostraca or inscribed pieces of limestone, such as had been unearthed the year before”).

faced in trying to achieve this objective.⁹ During Uvo Hölscher's work on the late antique remains at Medinet Habu (Djeme) in the 1930s, field numbers for a minority of ostraca were recorded: 55 of the 400 ostraca published in *O. Medin. Habu Copt.* (13.8 percent). Modern excavations record all material in situ; for example, the texts from TT 29 discovered during work in the tomb by the University of Brussels Expedition in the Theban Necropolis (*Mission archéologique dans la Nécropole thébaine*) published as *O. Frange* are accompanied by their field numbers.¹⁰

The resulting situation is one in which the textual corpus of western Thebes comprises a mix of items (a) with precise findspots within a site, (b) with secure provenance but without in situ information, (c) with uncertain provenance based on information provided by sellers, and (d) with a general—and sometimes tentative—broad Theban provenance. The quantity of items within the first two categories, that is, secure provenance to a specific site (even if the exact location therein is not known), creates a dataset on which observations concerning written culture and material use can be made. For the current study, data will be drawn from six sites, from each of which hundreds of ostraca have been discovered: the monastery of Apa Phoibammon; the monastery at Deir el-Bachit; the monastery of Epiphanius; the cell of Frange; the church of St Mark, and the village Djeme.

The monastery of Apa Phoibammon at Deir el-Bahri was founded in the late sixth century by Abraham, bishop of Hermonthis.¹¹ Many of the ostraca from the monastery date to the early seventh century and are connected with Abraham himself.¹² Recent excavations on Dra Abu el-Naga / Deir el-Bachit have revealed a complex that rivals the monastery of Apa Phoibammon in size, which has been identified (more or less confidently) as the monastery of Apa Paul that was long-known from written sources.¹³ The ostraca found during the excavations are published online.¹⁴ In 1926, several hundred texts (on a variety of supports) from the so-called monastery of Epiphanius were published as *P. Mon. Epiph.*¹⁵ Thousands of ostraca that were not published at

⁹ Winlock/Crum 1926, xxii: "Conscientious attempts were made to keep an accurate record of the finding-places of all of the written documents during the excavation of the Monastery, but circumstances were against this record having the value which might be expected." The particular hindrances, described over pp. xxii–xxiii, include the ancient and modern decontextualisation of items and the oversight of diggers who mixed up inscribed sherds with discarded material.

¹⁰ The archaeological report on TT 29, by Laurent Bavay, awaits publication, at which time the field numbers published in the text volume can be located on the plan of the tomb (deposition of items within the tomb is discussed further in section 3).

¹¹ Godlewski 1986 is a detailed study of the archaeology and history of the monastery.

¹² For Abraham and his associated texts, see Krause 1956.

¹³ See Beckh 2016; Beckh/Eichner/Hodak 2011; Polz et al. 2012, 127–134.

¹⁴ *Koptische Ostraka Online: Koptische nichtliterarische Texte aus dem thebanischen Raum*: koptolys.gwi.uni-muenchen.de (last accessed: 2.5.2018).

¹⁵ To date, only Bucking 2007 has attempted to contextualise texts within the monastery based on the information recorded by Winlock.

that time were sold by the Metropolitan Museum of Art to Columbia University. The majority of this large group remain unpublished, but their metadata is available for analysis online.¹⁶ Over 800 ostraca from TT 29 were published in O. Frange. The majority of these ostraca concern the activities of the monk Frange; texts written by him have also been found at several other locations in Thebes.¹⁷ The church (*topos*) of St Mark on Gounet Mourrai was excavated in the 1980s and almost 400 ostraca found at that time have recently been published, as O. Saint-Marc.¹⁸ Finally, the village Djeme built within the remains of Medinet Habu and most likely the largest village in the area has produced a wealth of written evidence, although it is difficult to determine the number of published texts, for reasons that will be discussed in the next section.

2 Methodological Problems

First things first, what is an ostrakon? How broad should this category be and does it encapsulate any text—whether in ink or incised—on a sherd, whether limestone, pottery, or wood (a medium that has not heretofore been mentioned, but see Section 3). In the database of the Deir el-Bachit ostraca, two items are included that push this categorisation. O. Bachit 552 is a limestone ball weighing 304.5 grams, bearing two lines of text on one face and a single letter on another: “The grape of weight 9”. The text describes the function of the object, it is a label, and the inclusion of O. Bachit 552 in the database of texts from the site reflects the fact that it bears writing, but the text is part of the primary use of the item; it is not the secondary use of a broken sherd. The second item is more difficult to interpret. O. Bachit 1177 is a flat limestone slab with incised lines and two discernible letters; damage to several sides has resulted in the loss of other strokes and it is not possible to determine what purpose the block—and consequently the text—served. For the current purpose, every item published as an ‘ostrakon’ has been included in this study, and the removal of such items from the dataset would have a minor effect on the statistics presented below.

16 The records are accessible via APIS (Advanced Papyrological Information System) at papyri.info (last accessed: 2.5.2018). As they are unpublished (and also have not been integrated into Trismegistos, so do not form part of the statistics concerning Theban ostraca), they do not form part of the current study. It should also be noted that not all the Columbia ostraca derive from the area around TT 103 (the so-called monastery of Epiphanius), but some come from other Theban sites; for their provenance, see O’Connell 2006.

17 A list of these texts is provided in O. Frange pp. 33–35; their provenances include Djeme, the Ramesseum, Deir el-Bahri, the monastery of Epiphanius, the church of St Mark, MMA 1152, TT 85, TT 95, and one ostrakon from Karnak on the east bank.

18 In addition to the introduction to O. Saint-Marc, see Ballet 2007, which discusses the ceramic material from the church.

When considering the provenance of texts, one needs to pay attention to where precisely the object was found. The findspot is exactly that, a findspot, and it does not necessarily represent the location in which the text was written or indeed the location to where it was sent. Secondary and perhaps tertiary decontextualization of the object in antiquity and modern times may have moved the item from its authentic place of deposition. Apart from the possibility of multiple recontextualizations of ostraca, a major problem when determining the use of materials at different sites is the issue of where the text was written and where it was sent. This point is clear in the case of letters and possibly legal contracts, in which the two parties do not live in the same place. Some letters preserve the address and in some instances the residence of each party is noted, but these examples are rare.¹⁹ Even when the names and locations of sender and recipient are known, the letter did not necessarily stay with the recipient. The archive of the monk Frange, who resided in TT 29, is a case in point. While some of the letters that he wrote stayed with the recipient (for example, O.Medin.Habu-Copt. 139, which he wrote to the well-known Djeme resident Koloje and which was found in the village during the University of Chicago's work at the site), many others had been returned to him and were found in his own cell, together with letters that were written to him.²⁰ Frange's archive is a good case study of the different ways in which texts circulated and how find spot may or may not indicate writing spot.

A different type of text-movement is witnessed by DRO 3 (Deir el-Roumi ostrakon). This money contract was written by Comes son of Pahom to Andreas son of Petros, both of whom are stated as being from Djeme.²¹ Taken in isolation, the discovery of this ostrakon in Deir el-Roumi, at quite some distance from the village, is quite puzzling. However, it forms part of a small dossier concerning Andreas found at the site.²² In this instance, the texts were written in one location but transported by their owner, Andreas, as part of his personal property when he moved from the village to pursue a monastic life in the Theban mountain range. Andreas' archive is therefore not representative of writing habits at Deir el-Roumi.

A final word on methodological problems concerns data collection and problems with text editions and online papyrological tools (although future development of the

¹⁹ On identifying the location of the two parties, in particular in legal documents and letters, see Burchfield 2016.

²⁰ It is possible that these letters were drafts that Frange wrote but never sent. However, unless duplicate copies of any of these letters are discovered (and no such duplicates are known), it is not possible to determine conclusively that these letters are drafts.

²¹ ἀνοκ κῤρμες μπαζαμ πρμχμε εἰςδαῖ νᾶνδρεας ᾠπετρος πρμχμε ον "I, Comes (son) of Pachom from Djeme write to Andreas (son) of Petros also from Djeme." For the edition, see Delattre/Lecuyot 2015, 111–112.

²² Six ostraca were found at Deir el-Roumi (DRO 3, 7, 10, and 83–85), another, SB Kopt. I 46, was not found during the excavation of the site but is attributed to the same Andreas; for his archive, see Delattre/Lecuyot 2015, 109–110.

latter will improve matters). As the aim of the current study is to examine the material aspects of ostraca, the lack of detailed (or indeed any) information about physical features hinders such discussions. For the most part, this lack of information is due to the lack of interest on the side of the editors of the texts in material properties of the objects on which they are written. It is possible to consult published ostraca in museum collections, but such a re-examination of the original items is labor (and cost) intensive and not a pragmatic option. Future digitalization of museum collections will facilitate such studies, but for now there is little that can be done.

Issues with online papyrological tools (Trismegistos, the Brussels Coptic Database, and the Duke Databank of Documentary Papyri) are more easy to resolve, at least in some respects.²³ None of these online databases are complete: the Brussels Database has not been updated since August 2014 (and it only includes non-literary texts, therefore excluding a large number of ostraca) and key recent corpora are yet to be added to Trismegistos, e. g., O.Saint-Marc. Additionally, in Trismegistos—at the time of writing—Djeme is used to refer to all sites in western Thebes and it is difficult to find texts from the village itself; searches for Medinet Habu produce only ca. 400 ostraca, which is much smaller than the actual number of texts (the number of tax receipts from the village alone surpasses that figure). Other problems with quick online searches include the fact that ostraca with different texts on each face, each of which are given different publication numbers, increase the total number count of actual ostraca (producing a total number of texts on ostraca rather than individual ostraca). Careful checking of the data can resolve this point, but with thousands of ostraca from western Thebes, it is a slow process; fortunately, the number of duplicate entries does not significantly affect the final numbers. Minor changes in numbers also result from joins of fragments after their initial publication, as is the case with a small number of Frange ostraca.²⁴ Consequently, the numbers used in this preliminary study will certainly be modified slightly in the future, but the overall observations presented should remain valid.

23 The Duke Databank (DDbDP) is accessible at papyri.info (see n. 16); the Brussels Coptic Database is accessible at <https://dev.ulb.ac.be/philo/bad/copte/baseuk.php?page=accueiluk.php> (last accessed: 2.5.2018). Note, though, that the use of these tools is dependent on their long-term sustainability and survival.

24 For example, Delattre/Vanthieghem 2014b, 108–113 joined Frange texts that the original editors had published as separate fragments (O.Frange 385+485 and 442+456), while the original editors assigned individual numbers to three ostraca, O.Frange 452, 461, and 462, before identifying them as part of the same text.

3 Use of Limestone

In the introduction to his 1902 publication of ostraca, O.Crum, Crum noted that “a large proportion of the texts are upon flakes or slices of white limestone so easily obtained in Western Thebes and so admirably adapted for writing purposes. [...] we may suppose some official regulation or fashion to have prescribed the use of pottery for certain classes of records. The subsequent predominance of limestone among the official documents, both ecclesiastical and legal, shows that it was regarded as a material more honourable than pottery.” In addition to the observation concerning the sheer volume of texts on limestone, of particular note are Crum’s suggestions of the elevated status of limestone over pottery and of an official policy that prevented the use of pottery.²⁵ Coptic itself makes terminological distinctions between the two materials. Limestone sherds were $\pi\lambda\lambda\alpha\zeta$ ($\pi\lambda\acute{\alpha}\xi$) and pottery sherds were $\beta\lambda\chi\epsilon$; each term refers to the material itself, respectively a flat stone or tablet and any ceramic ware. The use of distinct terms indicates that there was a conscious realization of the difference between the two, but does this actually mean that there was a marked split in the categories of texts for which they could be used?

One point about the O.Crum volume, with its high number of limestone ostraca, needs to be stressed: the Theban texts here published come predominantly from the Egypt Exploration Fund excavations at Deir el-Bahri. The question is whether this geographic component skews the perspective of the use of limestone, and consequently whether its use is site specific or the rest of the Theban area exhibits the same tendencies. In order to address this issue, the following analysis focuses on the six sites mentioned in Section 2, and referred to in the table by their location rather than their name: Deir el-Bahri (monastery of Apa Phoibammon), Deir el-Bachit / Dra Abu el-Naga (monastery of Apa Paul), TT 130 (the monastery of Epiphanius), TT 29 (the cell of the monk Frange), Gounet Mourrai (the church of St Mark), and Medinet Habu (Djeme). For current purposes, only ostraca discovered during excavation work are included here, in order to guarantee the provenance of the texts.²⁶ ‘Provenance’ here

²⁵ One aspect of the use of limestone that will not be addressed here is whether or not the material is exclusively or predominantly a Theban practice. A limestone ostrakon published by Delattre/Vantheigheem 2014b, 104, is assigned a Theban provenance on the basis that: “L’usage du calcaire indique que le texte est de provenance thébaine.” The use of limestone is attested elsewhere, e. g., Apollonoopolis (SB Kopt. I 12; SB Kopt. II 1098), Hermonthis (O.Brit.Mus.Copt. 1, p. 32, pl. 24.2), Nagada (O.Brit.Mus.Copt. 1, p. 37, pl. 30.3; p. 48, pl. 37.5; p. 49, pl. 38.3; etc.). At the time of writing, Trismegistos also noted an ostrakon from Bawit as on limestone, MPER N. S. 18.222, but this is an error and it is in fact on pottery. All known limestone Coptic ostraca are from the restricted region of Apollonoopolis to Hermonthis, but not only western Thebes. The tendency to ascribe limestone to Thebes based only on material aspects and without further criteria may not be correct.

²⁶ For Deir el-Bahri, the following ostraca are included: those discovered during the EEF excavations by Edouard Naville (published ostraca in O.Crum and O.Brit.Mus.Copt. I); the unpublished ostraca discovered during the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s work at the site, all of which are now in the col-

can only mean findspot, and the problem of identifying place of writing as discussed above—and the impact this may have on material selection (especially when pursuing a geographic line of enquiry)—is especially relevant here. In future studies, the difficult task of separating findspot from writing spot will surely modify the following statistics somewhat, but as a starting point, the current figures indicate that location is a vital factor in influencing the material upon which scribes wrote.

Table one presents the statistics for ostraca from each site; wood is also included in the list, although it may be questioned to what extent it can be classified as ‘ostraca’. Its presence at several locations is a reminder that its use may have been more extensive, but that it simply has not survived as well as its more durable alternatives.

Tab. 1: Material of Ostraca (by findspot from excavations)

Site	Pottery	Limestone	Wood	Total	% Limestone
Deir el-Bahri	277	516	1	794	65.0
Deir el-Bachit / Dra Abu el-Naga	813 (479 + 334)	3 (3 + 0)	–	816	0.4
TT 103	436	64	2	502	12.7
TT 29	677	124	1	801	15.5
Church of St Mark	397	14	2	413	3.4
Djeme	395	10	–	405	2.5
Total	2,997	731	6	3,732	19.6

Table 1 shows that three sites are of note in terms of their use of limestone: Deir el-Bahri, TT 29, and TT 103. The high percentage of limestone use from the first of these three locations, 65 percent, seemingly corroborates Crum’s observations on the use of this material. However, as this figure is over three-times the average use (19.6 percent) of limestone from across the six sites, it is clearly a special case that seriously affects the perception (and statistics) of limestone use in western Thebes. If the data from Deir

lection of Columbia University and are catalogued in APIS (see n.16); the ostraca discovered during the Polish excavations at the site (O.Deir el-Bahari and SB Kopt. III 1271–1273, 1321–1323, 1658, 1661, 1670–1671, originally published in Markiewicz 1999 and 2000). The resulting number of ostraca is substantially higher than the 379 listed in Godlewski 1986, 153–160. While Columbia University ostraca also derive from TT 103, these statistics have not been included as the sheer number of items (ca. 3,000) renders their examination impractical for the current study. For Djeme, only the published ostraca found during the University of Chicago epigraphic mission at Medinet Habu are included, comprising primarily texts from O.Medin.HabuCopt. with a smaller number of P.Schutzbrieftexts (however, twelve texts in the latter collection are published without description and on the relevant online tools are labelled as limestone *or* pottery, and therefore they are not included in this study).

el-Bahri is removed, only 7.9 percent of ostraca are limestone and the two sites on Sheikh Abd el-Qurna, TT 29 and 103, show above average use of this material.

The texts from TT 29 date to the seventh and eighth centuries and were written to and by several of the cell's occupants, among whom Frange is the best known. As so many texts from TT 29 were written by him (and are either signed or can be attributed to him, with varying degrees of confidence), it is possible to focus on the habits of a single writer.²⁷ Of the 362 ostraca that he wrote, 73 are on limestone, that is 20.2 percent; this figure is almost 5 percent higher than the overall percentage of limestone ostraca found in the tomb (15.5 percent).²⁸ Adding the texts written by him that were found elsewhere in western Thebes, the percentage of limestone slightly rises to 22.4 percent.²⁹ The publication of the TT 29 ostraca is also unusual in that it provides information about the fabric of the pottery sherds. The majority of the 289 sherds were written on fragments from LRA 7 wares (162), after which pseudo-Aswan wares are the most common (80), and then Aswan wares (26); another 18 ostraca were written on sherds of a common but unidentified ceramic type. The majority of potsherds therefore were written on contemporary late antique wares that would have been common in the region. Single texts were written on less common ceramic types: imported LRA 1 (O.Frange 124), Egyptian Red Slip A (O.Frange 54), and New Kingdom Marl D (O.Frange 501); on the use of pharaonic fragments, see the next section.

The editors of the Frange texts, Anne Boud'hors and Chantal Heurtel, pose several possible reasons for Frange's use of limestone: "est-il tombé sur un 'filon' de calcaire qu'il a utilisé pendant un certain temps, jusqu'à ce qu'il s'épuise? A-t-il voulu faire un essai, abandonné ensuite? Préférait-il généralement la terre cuite, plus facile à utiliser sans préparation préalable?"³⁰ In comparison to the use of limestone from Sheikh Abd el-Qurna, Frange's use is only slightly elevated, but is not exceptional for individuals here.

27 This group includes texts that he wrote on behalf of other individuals, although this does raise another issue: when one person was writing for another, who would provide the ostrakon? As material was readily available, it was perhaps the writer who supplied the sherd and so the selection reflects writer's preferences.

28 In their discussion of the use of limestone in the Frange dossier, Boud'hors and Heurtel note that "les ostraca de calcaire sont nettement minoritaires (on en compte 84) et il sont presque tous de sa main" (O.Frange p. 15). Their count is different to mine because I only include here the ostraca written in his hand.

29 A new total of 389 ostraca, of which 87 are on limestone. For a list of Frange's texts found at other sites, see O.Frange pp. 33–34; note that I have not included here the texts listed there as unedited, with the exception of the ostrakon from the church of St Mark, which has since been published.

30 O.Frange p. 15. On Frange's material preferences, note that Wilfong's comments in his introduction to O.Clackson 34, wherein he notes that most of Frange's ostraca were written on limestone ("which is not surprising given the fact that limestone is the more common medium for monastics living in the west Theban hills"), were made before the publication of O.Frange (and before the publication of the O.Saint-Marc and Deir el-Bachit ostraca).

It is not possible to undertake such an analysis of the use of materials at TT 103: many of the texts comprise letters written to the monastery, and it is frequently not known where they were written; most of the texts cannot be assigned to specific individuals; no description is provided about the material aspects of the sherds, beyond limestone or pottery;³¹ a significant number of papyrus documents found at this site show that a diverse range of writing materials were used at the site (and consequently either that writers had different access to resources or different preferences).³² However, what TT 103 has in common with TT 29 is its general location on Sheikh Abd el-Qurna and its proximity to Deir el-Bahri. At only a few hundred meters from Deir el-Bahri, they are significantly closer than most other sites in western Thebes, especially the church of St Mark and Djeme, both of which are towards the south of the region. The area around this part of the Theban mountain range therefore shows an atypical use of limestone. The question, then, is why?

Rather than reflecting conscious decisions regarding the use of material, the high use of limestone is most likely due to a very pragmatic reason: the presence of the destroyed temple of Thutmosis III. The temple of this 18th Dynasty pharaoh, built in the last decade of his reign (ca. 1435–1425 BCE), was destroyed already only three-hundred years later during the 20th Dynasty (ca. 1189–1077 BCE), seemingly by a rockslide. It was subsequently used by quarrymen, who dismantled the site almost completely for other purposes. This quarrying activity seems to have come to an end during the following 21st Dynasty (ca. 1069–945 BCE) after another rockslide.³³ The result of the destruction and quarrying of the temple's ruins was the creation of a large number of small sherds of worked limestone, which provided a perfect surface for writing and which were easily accessible to scribes and writers in the immediate vicinity. That these sherds are of worked limestone is not unimportant—there was no need for writers to smooth and modify the sherds in order to provide surfaces suitable for writing. This convenience and accessibility must surely have affected the decisions behind the use of limestone.

In light of the observations on the geographic location as affecting the use of material, is it possible to attribute all limestone ostraca from Thebes that do not have secure provenance to these sites, with—on statistical grounds—Deir el-Bahri as the most likely site? Such a proposition is difficult to substantiate, as material may have circulated around the region for a variety of reasons and ostraca sent out from these three sites may have been reused. However, if the ten limestone ostraca from Djeme

31 However, for the material in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (the majority of the published texts), images of all items are available online and observations on their materiality could be made on the basis of them.

32 There are 111 published papyri from the site, accounting for almost twice the number of texts on limestone sherds.

33 For the destruction and dismantling of the temple, see Lipiński 1977, 10–11. I thank Sandra Lippert (Montpellier) for drawing my attention to the situation of the temple of Thutmosis III.

are examined, it is clear that several of them at least were not written in the village. O.Medin.HabuCopt. 138–140 are letters written from Frange (and so were written at TT 29) and O.Medin.HabuCopt. 145 is a letter from Abraham (at Deir el-Bahri) to Pisentius.³⁴ In terms of texts written in the village, the removal of these ostraca from the dataset reduces the already small number of limestone sherds, making the total number almost negligible. Similarly, several of the limestone ostraca from the church of St Mark can also be attributed to scribes from other sites: O.Saint-Marc 94 is written by the scribe David from Deir el-Bahri and O.Saint-Marc 168 is perhaps in the hand of Moses from TT 29.³⁵ Some texts on limestone are in the hand of Mark, though, or can at least be attributed to him: O.Saint-Marc 6, 110, 113, 143, and 160. The overall statistics for limestone use at the church is therefore lower than presented in Table 1, although it was used on rare occasion.

4 Use of Pharaonic Pottery

In 1902, Walter Crum observed that the potsherds upon which tax receipts were written were of a material distinct from the majority of sherds used at Djeme: “the material [...] is always without ribs, glazed and generally of a light yellow color. The shape [...] is usually triangular.”³⁶ The tax receipts in question date to the 710s and 720s, were written by a small number of scribes from the village, are for a number of taxes (of which the poll tax is the most common), and are written primarily in Coptic, although some are written entirely in Greek.³⁷

Over the following fifty years, both Walter Till in his publication of a corpus of letters of protection (P.Schutzbriefe) and Elizabeth Stefanski and Miriam Lichtheim in the introduction of their edition of ostraca from Djeme (O.Medin.HabuCopt.) commented on this point, and the nature of the wares upon which tax receipts were written. More recently, Laurant Bavay and Alain Delattre addressed this issue. Their analysis focused on three receipts in the Brussels collection, O.Crum Ad. 37, SB Kopt. III 1423, and SB Kopt. IV 1814, which they concluded to be on sherds from 18th and 19th Dynasty amphorae, produced some 2,000 years before the tax receipts were issued

³⁴ If this Pisentius is the famous bishop of Koptos, who resided in western Thebes during the Persian invasion of the 620s, how the letter arrived in the village of Djeme is unclear, as Pisentius did not reside here; for Pisentius, in particular the re-publication of his dossier of letters, see Vliet 2002 and 2013. Pisentius was certainly part of bishop Abraham’s network (see Dekker 2018), but it is a common name, as the number of entries in Till 1962, 166–170 demonstrates.

³⁵ On David (Crum’s ‘Hand D’), see Garel forthcoming; for Moses, see O.Frange pp. 22–23 and Heurtel 2008.

³⁶ O.Crum p. xi.

³⁷ See Cromwell 2017, chapter 4, and the overview of receipts provided in P.Stras.Copt. pp. 209–239.

(Marl D and F).³⁸ Their brief consultation of the group of over 50 tax receipts in the Louvre revealed that they are written on the same type of support.³⁹ Of the 40 tax receipts in Strasbourg (P.Stras.Copt. 27–66), 33 are described as being Marl D sherds, albeit with varying degrees of certainty.⁴⁰ Preliminary analysis of the receipts in the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology also corroborates these observations, although the materials are not all of the same kind (for example, a few pieces seem to be Qena wares).⁴¹

The advantages provided by this type of sherd have already been discussed by Delattre.⁴² The flat and smooth surface, often with a polished slip, was perfectly suited for the quick, cursive script employed by the professional scribes who wrote these receipts. Such qualities would be an advantage especially on those days when scribes wrote a large number of receipts.⁴³ Additionally, the ink was easily readable on these fragments, especially in contrast to the more porous surface of, for example, LRA 7 sherds.

Before stating categorically that all early eighth century tax receipts are written on ancient sherds, it should be noted that a few at least were not, for example P.Stras.Copt. 35 is written on a fragment of a late roman amphora (LRA 7), a dark brown, ribbed ware commonly used for everyday writing in the seventh and eighth centuries.⁴⁴ To the best of my knowledge, this is the only tax receipt that is written on such a sherd, although this is difficult to confirm without descriptions or images of

38 Bavay/Delattre 2013, 382–383. The fabric of the sherd on which SB Kopt. IV 1814 was written is the earliest of the three: Marl D is particularly well attested during the reign of Amenhotep III (died ca. 1351 BCE).

39 Bavay/Delattre 2013, 383 (although a systematic report on these ostraca, originally published in Boud’hors 1996 and now bearing the sigla SB Kopt. II 955–1011, is lacking).

40 P.Stras.Copt. pp. 210–211. See also, for example, three of the receipts published in Delattre/Vanthieghem 2014a, which are described as being on New Kingdom sherds: O.Hamb.Copt.inv. V (pp. 96–97) and II (pp. 97–98), and O.Camb. 138 (pp. 99–100); while the other four sherds are described, the type of amphorae from which they derived is not identified.

41 I am currently in the process of editing these receipts for publication; for a preliminary overview of the group, see Wilfong 2004. I thank Clementina Caputo for her comments on the ostraca; her analysis of the fabrics will be included with the text editions.

42 Bavay/Delattre 2013, 384 and P.Stras.Copt. p. 211. More recently, Haensch and Kreuzsaler 2018, 75 n. 6, have also commented on the use of pharaonic amphorae for the writing of tax receipts, noting that material analysis of representative examples is still pending.

43 For the dates of the receipts drawn up by Aristophanes son of Johannes, see Cromwell 2017a, Appendix 3; in particular note Epiph 18, year 11 (12 July 727) and Mesore 27, year 11 (20 August 727), from which dates the largest number of receipts survive (16 and 14 receipts respectively).

44 The receipt is otherwise quite standard. It is written in Greek by the most prolific scribe of tax receipts, Psate son of Pisrael (for whom, see P.Stras.Copt. pp. 231–234 and Cromwell 2017b), who wrote several receipts in Greek. It is for quite a rare tax, the μέρος ναυτῶν (probably used to pay the salary of sailors engaged in the naval duty), which is attested in three other receipts, O.Ashm.Copt. 15, O.Crum 426, and O.Vind.Copt. 96; see Delattre 2002. Based on available images, the first and third of these receipts were written on New Kingdom wares.

all the ostraca.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, it can be stated confidently—even at this point in time without examination of all pieces—that tax receipts were typically written on ancient sherds, and this raises two immediate questions: (1) were fragments of pharaonic vessels used for writing other texts in western Thebes? (2) if only tax receipts were written on New Kingdom sherds, what can be inferred from this?

As noted above, a considerable hindrance to addressing the first of these two questions is the lack of information in early publications concerning the material aspects of potsherds. One of the scribes most frequently attested in tax receipts, Aristophanes son of Johannes, wrote two other ostraca: O.Medin.HabuCopt. 88 (which he signed) and O.Medin.HabuCopt. 24 (a list of names, including his own, and in his hand). The first of these is described only as “red pottery” and the second as “red pottery with a reddish slip”. A black-and-white image of the former is included among the publication’s plates, but it is difficult to identify the ware and consequently whether or not Aristophanes, as a professional scribe, preferred to write only on ancient sherds, because of the properties described above.⁴⁶ However, this description stands in marked contrast to the description “brown ribbed pottery” that is used for most of the non-tax receipt sherds, indicating that these are common late antique wares (probably LRA 7).⁴⁷ Based on the limited information available, fragments of pharaonic vessels were mostly restricted to use for tax receipts; however, professional scribes—that is, the men who wrote the tax receipts—may also have used such sherds for other purposes.

This observation leads to the second question: it cannot be determined whether tax receipts specifically were written on ancient sherds or if the selection of such sherds in the village was a preferential choice by the scribes who wrote them. In the introduction to the editions of tax receipts in the Strasbourg collection, Delattre and Fournet propose possible reasons behind the use of pharaonic sherds: “on peut imaginer que les scribes n’avaient pas trop de difficultés à se procurer des tessons du Nouvel Empire. Peut-être même travaillaient-ils dans un secteur de la ville riche en restes céramiques, par exemple une zone de magasins. Par ailleurs, le caractère inhabituel du support conférait peut-être un caractère plus officiel au reçu.”⁴⁸ The second of these points, the conferment of an official character, as just discussed may simply be

⁴⁵ In this respect, it will be difficult to examine the fabric of many receipts—the largest single group of tax receipts were found during Hölscher’s work at Medinet Habu and after being studied in Chicago were returned to Cairo, where their current location is uncertain (they are presumed to be still in storage in the Egyptian Museum, rather than the Coptic Museum). Negatives of photographs taken of the ostraca are held in the archives of the Oriental Museum, Chicago, but these may not be sufficient for determining the nature of the support.

⁴⁶ For Aristophanes’ career, see Cromwell 2017a.

⁴⁷ This identification of LRA 7 seems to be confirmed by what plates are available in the volume; see, for example, the images of O.Medin.HabuCopt. 50, 56, 58, 61, 69, 73, 82, 134, 136, 142, 150, 144.

⁴⁸ P.Stras.Copt. p. 211.

a coincidence.⁴⁹ The first point, that New Kingdom sherds were relatively easy to procure and that scribes may have worked in an area of the town rich in ceramic remains, raises questions about the physical reality of the village itself in the early 8th century.

In brief, after its construction as the mortuary temple of Ramesses III, Medinet Habu was reoccupied already during the 21st to 24th Dynasties (ca. 1069–720 BCE), at which time little survived of the original buildings.⁵⁰ After this time, until the end of the Ptolemaic Period (30 BCE), there is no indication of habitation of the village, but there are traces of ancient *sebbakh*-digging in sectors of the site.⁵¹ The desertion of Medinet Habu came to an end during the Roman period, when new houses were built at the site. The Roman period floor level was approximately 1.9 meters above the original Ramesside level; by the time of the latest phase of occupation, the floor level was between 2.5–4 meters above that of the Ramesside period in the north and west of the temple area. Regardless, therefore, of where the 8th century scribes worked (at the site of an ancient storeroom or elsewhere), it is unlikely that a ready surface deposit of pharaonic sherds was available for their use within the confines of the ancient temple’s perimeter wall. As over 500 tax receipts are known, which date from a relatively short period of time (the 710s and 720s), there must have been an easy availability of pharaonic sherds. However, it is unlikely that they were picked up within the packed confines of Djeme. Rather, a New Kingdom dump outside the village was more likely the source. If correct, scribes must have made a conscious effort to collect the sherds.⁵² Is such effort indicative of an official policy to use specific sherd-types for tax receipts, or is it again down to personal preference? As has been stated several times above, defining the motivation for the use of New Kingdom sherds is difficult. However, the reuse of these ancient wares seems to be particular to scribes working in Djeme.

49 It is difficult to see how such a conferment could be confirmed. If tax receipts from other sites in Thebes are also written on pharaonic sherds, this would lend support to such a suggestion. Examination of three tax receipts from Deir el-Bachit (O.Bachit 1550 and 1843, and O.Dan kopt. 209) may prove helpful; unfortunately, no analysis of the wares of these items is provided currently on the database (for which, see n. 14).

50 Hölscher 1954, 3: “The entire area was covered with new structures, whose builders showed little regard for earlier walls but rather cut through them arbitrarily.”

51 Hölscher 1954, 34 and 56. Debris and Roman constructions on top of the digging indicates that it occurred already in antiquity.

52 Alternatively, these scribes worked outside the limits of the ancient temple where such a source of sherds was available. However, working outside the village proper seems less practical than making periodic journeys to collect more ostraca.

5 Future Work

In addition to the number of ostraca already published and those that await study in collections around the world, new texts are still being discovered in western Thebes.⁵³ The body of texts available for study—and texts with secure provenance—will therefore increase over the coming years. By necessity, the current paper has only focused on texts found at a small number of Theban sites, but future work will aim to include all texts from the region. Such an expansion would allow the study of the range of dispersal of materials that, as has been proposed above, are particular to certain places, e. g., limestone at Deir el-Bahri and its immediate area, and pharaonic sherds to Djeme. Apart from the ability to expand this analysis, future work on the materiality of Theban ostraca can address other questions.⁵⁴

One of the gifts to scholars interested in written culture is the high number of identifiable writers in western Thebes, ranging from individuals who could barely manage to sign their names to professional scribes. Personal preference has been mentioned several times, regarding the use of limestone and New Kingdom sherds, but this could be expanded to cover a range of physical features. Examination of the dossiers of individuals may reveal personal preferences, for example in the shape, size, and surface treatment of ostraca, and potentially whether writers modified the sherds on which they wrote (evidence for which from other sites is presented by Caputo in the current volume).

In the absence of substantial amounts of ceramic material from western Thebes, which was not reused as ostraca, analysis of the fabrics of the sherds may contribute to the knowledge of what wares were circulating around western Thebes.⁵⁵ For example, the presence of non-locally produced wares may provide evidence for regional and supra-regional trade networks. The publication and study of ostraca has the potential to contribute to the work of ceramicists rather than just papyrologists and philologists. However, the usefulness of ostraca publications to neighboring disciplines requires either collaboration with ceramicists from the beginning or—and as this is not always possible or practical⁵⁶—the provision of high-quality images and descriptions that are

⁵³ For preliminary reports on new ostraca, as well as editions of new material, see: Antoniuk 2010, Boud'hors 2017, and Garel 2016 (MMA 1152—note that these ostraca, following Boud'hors 2017, are now to be referred to as O.Gurna Górecki); Behlmer 2007 (TT 85 and 87); Behlmer/Underwood 2010 and Choat 2016 (TT 233); Müller 2016 (TT 223 and 390); Underwood/Behlmer 2016 (TT 95).

⁵⁴ I do not include here the improvements that will be implemented over time regarding the online papyrological databases (updates to which occur regularly); the methodological problems outlined in Section 2 are the least insurmountable issues.

⁵⁵ A rare example of the study of ceramic material in late antique western Thebes is Beckh's work on the pottery from Deir el-Bachit (see Beckh 2007 and 2010), and Ballet's examination of the ceramic material from the church of St Mark (Ballet 2007).

⁵⁶ Time restrictions, scheduling, working from originals or photographs, etc., can easily derail the best intentions for collaborative work; attention to material aspects is certainly something to which

useful to those interested in more than the preserved text. Ideally, all text editions should include information on the size, shape, and surface and surface treatments of the ostrakon; more detailed data requires the assistance of ceramicists, for example, the portion of the original vessel from which the fragment comes, its fabric, and possibly even the original vessel type.

Paying attention to the material aspects of ostraca can help to identify patterns in the production and circulation of texts, but this is not to say that it can be used to determine provenance in every case. Many ostraca are simply of wares too common to have diagnostic features. However, as has hopefully been demonstrated, examination of physical elements can provide new understandings into written culture and the pragmatics of writing.

Appendix

Three Unpublished Ostraca from Deir el-Bahri

The three ostraca published here for the first time reflect some of the methodological problems discussed in Section 2 concerning determining provenance and the circulation of texts around western Thebes. All three letters were found at Deir el-Bahri during the Metropolitan Museum of Art's excavations in western Thebes and are now part of the collection of Columbia University.⁵⁷ Two of the texts are incomplete, yet all provide at least some information regarding the sender or recipient of the letter. Images of all three ostraca are available for download on APIS.⁵⁸

1 Letter to Bishop Abraham Concerning Ordination (Fig. 2)

O.Col.inv. 192
TM 317914

17.5 × 9 cm

590–610/620

Description: Pottery sherd, brown, ribbed; LRA 7. This broad, rectangular sherd is broken at the lower left and right corners. It is possible that some lines are lost from the bottom.

I have not been able to give attention in the past. What I propose is an ideal situation, if the ideal is ever attainable.

⁵⁷ The three ostraca have the accession numbers 64.11.164 (O.Col.inv. 192, <http://papyri.info/apis/columbia.apis.192>), 64.2.393 (O.Col.inv. 574, <http://papyri.info/apis/columbia.apis.574>), and 64.2.401 (O.Col.inv. 582, <http://papyri.info/apis/columbia.apis.582>) (last accessed: 16.1.2020). For the attribution of the ostraca in the sequence 64.2.1–65.3.112 to Deir el-Bahri, see O'Connell 2006, 126–127.

⁵⁸ See n. 16.

Content: The name of the sender is lost, but the recipient is bishop Abraham. Despite loss of some of the text, the request for prayers and ordination as deacon of a third party is clear. This letter is an addition to the body of such requests: O.Crum 29–35 and Ad. 7 are letters regarding ordination of the writers (typically involving the requirements that they need to meet) and O.Crum 36–37 are letters requesting ordination for other men. Few of the letters preserve the location of the parties and where they will become deacon: O.Crum 31 mentions the church of The, 33 the Small Church (in Djeme?), and 36 is written from villagers from Piôhe and concerns the church of St Mary. The letter may, therefore, have been written from anywhere in western Thebes or further afield.

ΑΠΑ ΑΒΡΑΖΑΜ ΠΕΡΙΣ[ΚΟΠΟΣ]
 † ΖΑ ΘΗ ΜΕΝ ΜΠΑΩΔΧΕ ΝΕΛΛΧ(ΙΣΤΟΣ)
 † ΨΙΝΕ ΕΤΕΚΜΝΤΕΙΩΤ ΕΤΟΥΔ[ΔΒ]
 4 ΕΤΦΟΡΕΙ ΜΠΕΧΣ ΖΝ ΟΥΜΕ
 ΑΡΙ ΤΑΓΑΠΗ ΝΓΩΛΗΛ ΕΧΩΝ
 ΕΤΕΚΜΝΤΕΙΩΤ ΕΤΟΥΔΔΒ ΧΟΟΥ
 [.2] . . . ΤΒΕΖ ΝΓΤΟΥΩ ΝΑΝ
 8 [.] ΔΙΑΚΟΝΟΣ ΚΑΙ Γ[ΑΡ .?]
 [.] ΝΩΜΔ[. ?]

1 ἐπίσκοπος 2 μέν, ελαχ/ *ostr.* 4 φορεῖν 5 ἀγάπη 8 διάκονος, καὶ γάρ

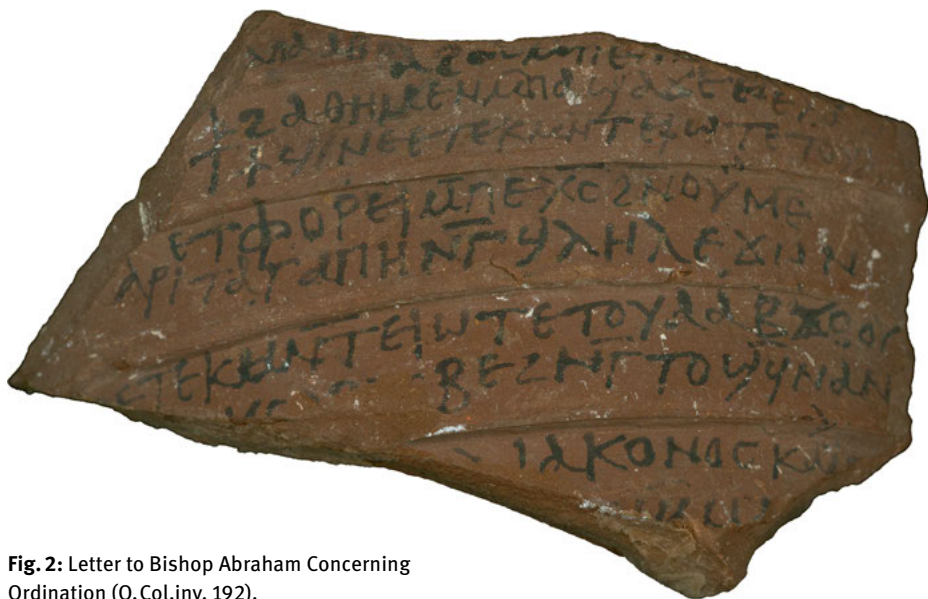


Fig. 2: Letter to Bishop Abraham Concerning Ordination (O.Col.inv. 192).

“Bishop Apa Abraham. ⲡ Before my humble matter, I greet your holy paternity, which truly bears Christ. Please pray for me. May your holy paternity send [...] and appoint him for us [as] deacon, for [...] he [...]”

- 1 The first line is uneven and follows the edge of the ostrakon, making it unlikely that any lines are lost from the beginning of the ostrakon. As the rest of the lines are evenly spaced and follow the ribs of the sherd, the address was most probably written after the letter proper.
- 3 The iota in ⲉⲓⲱⲧ has a horizontal stroke, suggesting that there is a correction here.
- 6 Mu in ⲙⲛⲧⲉⲓⲱⲧ is a correction over an initial letter.
- 7 The meaning of [.2] . . . ⲧⲃⲉⲗ is unclear. As the writer is requesting an individual to be ordained deacon, it is possible that the name of the person in question is written here. The surviving traces do not, however, recall attested names.

2 Letter from Bishop Abraham Concerning a Festival (Fig. 3)

O.Col.inv. 574
TM 320024

6 × 5.7 cm

590–610/620

Description: Limestone sherd, palm-sized and written on both sides. It is mostly complete, except for chips to the left and right edges that have resulted in the loss of some letters. On the back, the text is written over two faces of the sherd and the ink is worn on the face on the right side.

Content: The start of the letter is abrupt, without the polite framework exhibited in letters to superiors (as seen in letter 1 above). The letter concerns a celebration at the *topos* of Apa Johannes, referred to here by name only, and the provision of wine. A *topos* of Apa Johannes occurs in several Theban texts: O.Crum 310 (mentioning a monk and identifying it as a *topos*), 482, 485 (identifying it as a ⲙⲁ “place”), Ad. 30 (identifying it as a *topos*), and P.Mon.Epiph. 84 and 397 (mentioning an *oikonomos*).⁵⁹ The letter is written from bishop Abraham to a priest, Ananias; it was therefore written at Deir el-Bahri, but was also returned and deposited there.

Front

[ⲡ ⲱ]ⲟⲣⲛ̄ ⲙⲉⲛ ⲧⲱⲓ-

[ⲛⲉ] ⲉⲣⲟⲕ ⲟⲅⲱⲱ

[ⲛⲧ]ⲣⲱⲗ ⲉⲗⲛⲁ ⲓ-

- 4 [ⲱ]ⲗⲛⲛⲥ ⲙⲙⲟ-
ⲛ ⲗⲅⲭ[ⲟ-]

⁵⁹ See Papaconstantinou 2001, 118–119.

Back

- ΟC ΝΑ[. ?]
 ΕΚΧΩ ΔΝ[Ι]
 8 ΗΡΗ ΕΒΟΛ ΤΔ[Δ-]
 C ΝΑΝΑΝΙΑC Π-
 ΠΡΕCΒ(ΥΤΕΡΟC) ΣΙΤΝ̄ Δ-
 ΒΡΑΖΑΜ ΠΕΠΙ-
 12 CΚ(ΟΠΟC)

1 μέν 10 πρεcβ *ostr.*, πρεcβύτεροc 11–12 επιcκ/ *ostr.*, ἐπίcκοποc.

“[F]irst, I g[reet] you. Please celebrate at Apa J[oh]annes. They sent to [...], as you said ‘Bri[ng] wine.’ Give it to the priest Ananias from bishop Abraham.”

- 2 For this use of ΟΥΩΩ as a politeness marker in other Deir el-Bahri texts, see O.Crum 70.2 (ΟΥΩΩ ΝΓΔΟΚΙΜΑΖΕ ΜΠΩΒ, “Please examine the matter”) and O.Brit.Mus.Copt. 2.22.1 (ΟΥΩΩ ΝΓΒΩΚ ΕΝΖΗΤ “Please go north”).
 3–4 Perhaps instead ι[ωz]ΔΗΗC.
 6 The lost suffix pronoun should perhaps be reconstructed as ΝΑ[Ι], the 1sg “to me”.
 7 The speech marker, χε, has been omitted.
 12 There is a considerable gap between sigma and kappa, the reason for which is not clear. There does not appear to be damage to the surface here that the writer was avoiding; it is possible that he instead chose to fill the space at the bottom of the ostrakon, but this is pure speculation.



Fig. 3: Letter from Bishop Abraham Concerning a Festival (O.Col.inv. 574), left = front, right = back.

3 Letter from Victor Concerning Papyrus (Fig. 4)

O.Col.inv. 582
TM 320033

7.7 × 7.2 cm

590–610/620

Description: Limestone sherd, almost square and discolored in places. Apart from some small chips, the sherd is complete. The text is written on one face, apart from one word that is written on the back.

Content: Address to a woman, Susanna, from Victor, this note accompanied the delivery of papyrus. As it is written on limestone and is from a known figure, the priest Victor,⁶⁰ it was written at Deir el-Bahri and—as with letter 2 above—was also returned to the site. The ostrakon is written in ‘Hand D’ (following Crum’s identification of scribes at the monastery), that is, the monk David who acted as scribe for Victor.⁶¹

Front

+ ΚΑΤΑ ΘΕ ΕΝΤΑΤΝ-
ΤΝΝΟΟΥ ΕΞΟΥΝ ΝΑΪ
†ΝΟΥ ΕΙΣ ΠΧΑΡΤΗΣ ΔΝ-
4 C2ΔΙΤῚ ΚΑΤΑ ΘΕ ΝΤΑΤΕ-
ΤΝΧΟΟΣ ΕΙΣ ΖΗΠΕ ΔΝ-
ΚΑΔῚ Ζ[Δ]ΖΤΗΪ ΟΥΧΔΙ
ΖΜ ΠΧΟΕΙC ΤΑΔC
8 ΝCΟΥCΑΝΝΑ
ΖΙΤΝ ΒΙΚΤΩΡ

Back

ΠΠΡΕCΒΥΤΕΡΟC
+

1 κατά 3 χάρτης 4 κατά 10 πρεσβύτερος.

+ According to what you sent to me, now, here is the papyrus. We wrote it according to what you said, ‘Look, we placed it before me’. Farewell in the Lord. Give it to Susanna from the priest Victor. +”

5 ΖΗ(Η)ΠΕ is unusual in Sahidic, in which ΖΗΗΤΕ is expected.

⁶⁰ For whom, see Garel 2016.

⁶¹ Garel (forthcoming) examines David’s hand.

- 5–6 It is unclear if the writer has confused pronouns here. The switch to 1pl. pronouns, “we”, suggests that this passage is direct speech, but the immediately following 1sg. pronoun “me” is then incorrect. If reported speech, “you have placed it before me” would be expected.
- 10 Despite the writing of this title in the middle of the ostracon, it should be read in conjunction with the name Victor, for which there was no space on the front.



Fig. 4: Letter from Victor Concerning Papyrus (O.Col.inv. 582), left = front, right = back.

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